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Plan to plug leaks with polygraphs assailed

Washington (AP) — Calling the lie detector "more of a fear detector," the head of the congressional Office of Technology Assessment said yesterday there is no scientific evidence to support a Reagan administration leak-plugging plan that would make almost half the federal work force liable to polygraph tests.

"The instrument cannot itself detect deception," testified Dr. John H. Gibbons, director of the agency. "It's more of a fear detector than a lie detector." A polygraph measures a person's physical reactions, such as change in heartbeat or skin moisture, during questioning.

Dr. Gibbons was among a parade of witnesses criticizing the plan on scientific, practical and constitutional grounds at a hearing by the Legislation and National Security Subcommittee of the House Government Operations Committee.

Under attack was a White House directive proposed in March as a way of preventing unauthorized disclosure of classified material. Also drawing fire was a similar proposal being considered by the Pentagon.

The plan calls for federal employees and civilian contractors with access to classified information to be disciplined for refusing to take a polygraph examination in connection with the probe of a leak.

Dr. Kenneth J. Coffey of the General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of Congress, said the proposals would apply to 2.5 million of the 5.1 million federal workers as well as another 1.3 million people employed

by defense contractors.

"It is aimed primarily at reducing leaks to the media," Dr. Coffey said, adding that the plan would have deterred "only a small number" of the 328 leaks reported to the GAO by executive branch agencies during the past five years.

Dr. Gibbons said that "there is no scientific evidence to establish the validity of polygraph testing for screening a large number of people in connection with the investigation of unauthorized disclosures."

He said studies reviewed by his office showed that polygraphs were accurate from 64 percent to 98 percent of the time. But he noted that accuracy depends on the percentage of guilty persons in a screening group. If that percentage is small, the polygraph is likely to incorrectly identify many persons as liars even while it succeeds in identifying most of the liars correctly.

Dr. Gibbons said the Office of Technology Assessment found "meaningful scientific evidence" of validity only in criminal cases, when investigators have collected much data and have narrowed the field of suspects.

He said that not only can lie detectors falsely snare an innocent yet nervous individual, but there is evidence that people can be trained to beat the devices.

"We concluded that imposing penalties for not taking a test may create a de facto involuntary condition that increases the chances of invalid or inconclusive test results," Dr. Gibbons testified.